

EXHIBIT 35

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

‘Cheer’ breakout star Jerry Harris arrested on federal child pornography charge

By Sonia Rao

Reporter



September 17, 2020 at 5:10 p.m. EDT

Jerry Harris, a prominent figure in the Netflix docuseries “Cheer,” was arrested Thursday on a federal child pornography charge, according to the U.S. attorney’s office for the Northern District of Illinois. Harris, a 21-year-old resident of Naperville, Ill., was accused in a criminal complaint of contacting an underage boy on social media and repeatedly requesting sexually explicit photos and videos.

If found guilty of the charge, Harris would face a minimum sentence of 15 years.

Federal court records state that during an interview conducted Monday at Harris’s residence, he told agents he had asked a 13-year-old for sexually explicit photos on Snapchat throughout a period lasting 15 months, and solicited oral sex from the minor at two separate cheerleading events in Florida and Texas. Harris also admitted that he had requested and received explicit photos from at least 10 to 15 other minors and engaged in oral and anal sex with a 15-year-old at a competition last year.

Harris’s arrest follows a lawsuit filed Monday on behalf of the 13-year-old and his twin brother, who are now 14. They say the behavior began after they connected with Harris at a competition when they were 13 and he was 19.

The lawsuit, filed in Texas with the District Court of Tarrant County, also lists as defendants the U.S. All Star Federation, a network of cheerleading and dance teams; Varsity Spirit, a company that sells uniforms and hosts competitions; and a Cheer Athletics gym. The document describes Harris as a “coach, trainer, mentor, representative, and agent” of all three organizations during the time in question.

In response to Harris’s arrest, attorneys Morgan Stewart and Sarah Klein, who represent the brothers, said in a statement that they were “grateful that the U.S. Attorney and the FBI have taken swift action to protect children” after the boys’ mother reported Harris to the bureau and Fort Worth police.

“We urge the authorities to undertake a thorough investigation of the United States All Star Federation, Varsity Spirit, and Cheer Athletics to determine which of its executives, employees, and representatives could have stopped Harris’ abuse and failed to do so,” the attorneys continued.

Harris’s representatives did not respond to The Washington Post’s requests for comment, but denied the allegations in a statement shared Monday with Variety: “We categorically dispute the claims made against Jerry Harris, which are alleged to have occurred when he was a teenager,” the spokesperson stated. “We are confident that when the investigation is completed the true facts will be revealed.”

Harris began to communicate with the twins after asking for their phone numbers and Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter handles at a 2018 competition, according to the lawsuit. It adds that his messages became sexual in nature “almost immediately,” and that he offered to help boost their social media presences in exchange for nude photos. At a national competition held the next year in Fort Worth, the document states, Harris told one of the brothers to meet him in a bathroom, where he allegedly demanded oral sex.

The Monday filing coincided with the initial USA Today report that the FBI executed a search warrant related to the sexual abuse allegations at a residence in Naperville, a suburb of Chicago. At the time, FBI spokeswoman Tina Jagerson referred The Post to a statement from the Chicago field office: “The FBI is conducting court-authorized law enforcement activity in the area. We have no further comment.”

Harris rose to fame earlier this year after appearing in the Emmy-nominated series “Cheer,” about the title-winning cheerleading team at Navarro, a community college in Corsicana, Tex. Known for his uplifting “mat talks,” or the cheerleading version of pep talks, Harris and the team’s coach, Monica Aldama, became the series’s most widely known figures. She is currently on “Dancing With the Stars.”

The lawsuit states that Harris was already a successful figure within the cheerleading community when he began “grooming” the brothers. It adds that their mother reported Harris to USASF, Varsity and Cheer Athletics after learning her sons “were not the only victims,” and that she filed a report with the Fort Worth police in July and the FBI in August. USA Today obtained letters sent in August to Florida and Texas police by Varsity’s chief legal officer, Burton Brillhart, who wrote that the company had become aware of the “inappropriate sexual conduct” allegations.

In a statement shared Monday with The Post, a Varsity representative said the company couldn’t comment on an active legal investigation, but that “we continue to cooperate with authorities on this matter.” Varsity did not respond to a follow-up request for comment on the lawsuit.

Cheer Athletics representative Jody Melton said Thursday that the organization was unable to review the lawsuit because it hadn’t yet been served with papers and “only learned about it Monday from a USA Today reporter.” He clarified that Harris had only been affiliated as an “athlete participant,” an arrangement concluded in March. Cheer Athletics was first made aware of the allegations in May, Melton continued, after which their leadership alerted the authorities.

USASF communications director Lynn Singer shared a statement saying that the company works closely with gym and program owners, event producers and coaches to “follow the highest standards of care for young athletes,” but that “we know there is always room for improvement.”

“The threat is always evolving and so, too, must our response,” the statement continues. “USASF is committed to continued improvement in our athlete safety programs and addressing concerns brought to our attention.”

By Sonia Rao

Sonia Rao is a pop culture reporter. She attended Boston University and wrote for the Boston Globe before coming to The Post in 2017. She officially joined the features department in 2019.  Twitter